

"SUDDENLY"

Shortly after the Kennedy assassination the agencies of government realized they had a predicament. Having decided Lee Harvey Oswald murdered President John F. Kennedy there was still the enigma of motive. Oswald had no propensity for violence. Granted there were claims Oswald took a shot at General Edwin Walker in April of 1963, alleged episodes of wife beating and opinions he had an antisocial disposition. However, most of the assertions were unsubstantiated. In a courtroom setting a competent attorney could refute the allegations. Since the suspect was deceased and without representation, Oswald was an easy target for character assassination.

Over a decade after the Warren Commission completed their work a book was published which, on the surface, appeared to shed light on Oswald's stimulus for the crime. We discovered in Priscilla Johnson McMillian's **"Marina and Lee"** that Oswald watched two movies on television. The movies were **"Suddenly"** and **"We Were Strangers."** In 1983, Jean Davison's book **"Oswald's Game"** appeared. That book amplified the threads of McMillian's observations into a full blown motive. Over the years Davison's theory has become entrenched in assassination folklore. It is used as "supporting evidence" by the Oswald as lone gunman theorists.

We begin with a description of both movies.

Suddenly (1954)** Frank Sinatra, Sterling Hayden, Nancy Gates, James Gleason. Dated thriller. Sinatra is impressive as the leader of a pack of hired assassins who plan to murder the President during his stopover in a sleepy little town. Due to the uncomfortable echoes of the Kennedy assassination, the film was out of circulation for many years, but it has not reemerged as a long-lost treasure; it is riddled with fifties stereotypes and mouthpiece characters. (Dir. Lewis Allen, 77 mins) ¹

¹ Steven H. Scheuer, Movies on TV and Videocassette (New York:Bantam Books, 1990), p.1021

We Were Strangers (1949)**1/2 Jennifer Jones, John Garfield, Pedro Armendariz. Despite the powerhouse cast, this movie about political intrigue and revolution in Cuba during the thirties is a disappointment. (Dir. John Huston, 106 mins) ²

With these summaries in mind we can review the appropriate section of both books to put the event in perspective.

"Lee saw two movies that night [Saturday, October 19, 1963], both of them saturated in violence. One was **Suddenly** (1954), starring Frank Sinatra, which is about a plot to kill the President of the United States. In the film Sinatra, a mentally unbalanced ex-serviceman who has been hired to do the job, drives to a small Western town where the President is due to arrive by train, debark, and get into a car that will drive him to the High Sierras for some mountain fishing. Sinatra finds a house overlooking the railroad station and seizes it, subduing the occupants. He leans out of a window and gets the railroad tracks into the cross hairs of his rifle sight. He waits and waits; finally, the train comes into view. But it chugs through town without stopping, and in the end Sinatra is killed.

Marina dozed through the first movie, and the one that followed- **We Were Strangers** (1949). This, too, was about assassination. Based on the actual overthrow of the Machado dictatorship in Cuba in 1933, the movie stars John Garfield as an American who has come to help the cause of revolution. He and a tiny band of cohorts plot to blow up the whole cabinet, including the president, at a single stroke. The plot fails and Garfield dies, but the people rise up in small groups all over Cuba and overthrow the dictatorship.

Marina remembers the movie's end-people were dancing in the streets, screaming with happiness because the president had been overthrown. Lee said it was exactly the way it had once happened in Cuba. It was the only time he showed any interest in Cuba after his return from Mexico." ³

As reinforcement to the portrayal of events established as fact in "Marina and Lee" enter Jean Davison. In "**Oswald's Game**" the same story appears with some major modifications.

² Ibid, p.1172

³ Priscilla Johnson McMillian, Marina and Lee (New York:Harper and Row, 1977), pp.475-476

"On the day following his birthday they went into the living room after supper to watch television together. Marina lay with her head in his lap, half-asleep, while he watched two old movies. Occasionally she felt him sit up straight and strain toward the television set, greatly excited.

What was he watching that caused this unusual reaction? By an eerie coincidence, the double feature he had chosen echoed the theme of Castro's public warning: murder plots against Cuban leaders could lead to retaliation." ⁴

Davison, as McMillian, explains the plots of both films, maintaining the first movie shown was "Suddenly." She goes on to claim, "I believe that, together with the two recent threats he [Oswald] made against President Kennedy's life, this excited reaction and his comments indicate that Oswald was, in fact, aware of Castro's warning about American-backed plots to assassinate him. He was excited because the double feature practically read his mind." ⁵

The reality is the event as described in both books is inaccurate. To see the not so subtle modifications one must review a minimum of four sources. The sources are Marina Oswald's testimony on the subject (1H71), Commission Exhibit 1790 (CE 1790) found in 23H403 and the television pages of **The Dallas Morning News** and **The Dallas Times Herald**. This material will be used to dismantle both stories but in particular that of Jean Davison.

"On the day following his birthday they went into the living room after supper to watch television together. Marina lay with her head in his lap, half-asleep, while he watched two old movies. Occasionally she felt him sit up straight and strain toward the television set, greatly excited."

From Marina's testimony (1H71):

Mr. Rankin. Well, "Suddenly," was about the assassination of a president, and the other was about the assassination of a Cuban dictator.

Mrs. Oswald. Yes, Lee saw those films.

⁴ Jean Davison, Oswald's Game (New York:W.W. Norton and Co., 1983), p.224

⁵ Ibid, p.226

Mr. Rankin. Did he tell you he had seen them?

Mrs. Oswald. I was with him when he watched them.

From Marina's statement to the Secret Service December 9, 1963 (CE1790).

"Marina Oswald further stated that her husband twice saw the TV showing of a moving picture depicting a plot to kill a Cuban dictator with a bomb where the plotters had to dig a tunnel and that Lee did not like the picture as he said that was the way they did it in the old days. She also thought Lee saw a TV showing of a movie where an attempt was made to kill a President at the railroad station with a rifle, from a house, but she was not sure about it (emphasis mine). The way Marina Oswald was describing the later picture, it leaves very little doubt that this picture is entitled "Suddenly" starring Frank Sinatra." ⁶

The official reports are very different from the Davison version of events. Marina never told investigators that she watched the movies with Lee after supper, that she lay with her head in Lee's lap, that they watched two movies, that Lee was greatly excited by the movies or that they saw "Suddenly" at all!

Davison claims, "The movie (We Were Strangers) was a fictionalized account of an actual situation which existed in Cuba-except that the methods shown were out of date." ⁷ She has forgotten it was Marina Oswald that made this claim for her husband in CE 1790, ". . . and that Lee did not like the picture as he said that was the way they did it in the old days."

"What was he watching that caused this unusual reaction? By an eerie coincidence, the double feature he had chosen echoed the theme of Castro's public warning: murder plots against Cuban leaders could lead to retaliation."

Here we have the assertion that the Oswalds watched a double feature in the comfort of the Paine living room. It is not true.

⁶ File No. CO-2-34030, CE 1790, 23H403, Report of ATSAIC Leon I. Gopadze.

⁷ Jean Davison, Oswald's Game (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1983), p.225

Years ago Fort Worth, Texas researcher Gary Mack reviewed the TV listings for the Dallas/Fort Worth area. He was the first I know of to question the validity of McMillian and Davison's versions of history. I decided to corroborate Mack's research and increase its scope. I started checking the TV listings in the newspapers beginning with Saturday, October 19, 1963. This was the date both authors maintained Oswald viewed both films. In the end I checked all listings between September 16, 1963 and November 15, 1963. Here are the results.

1) No television station in the Dallas/Fort Worth area showed a double feature during the period checked. Mack previously discovered it was not the policy of any station to show double features. My research confirmed his work.

2) "**We Were Strangers**" was aired twice during the review period. First shown on Channel 11 - Saturday, October 12, 1963 at 10 PM, it next appeared on Channel 11 the following day, Sunday, October 13, 1963 at 1 PM. It was impossible for the Oswald's to go ". . . into the living room after supper to watch television together."

3) "**Suddenly**" never aired during the period reviewed. Remember in CE 1790, "She (Marina) also thought Lee saw a TV showing of a movie where an attempt was made to kill a President at the railroad station with a rifle, from a house, but she was not sure about it."

In what appears to me as nothing more than journalistic dishonesty both authors and Davison to the greater extent fabricated a scenario that had no basis in fact. All three of us had the same documents at our disposal. They chose to ignore the facts. It is the average citizen that pays a price when individuals distort the historical record.

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